

pace is the trick by krelboyne

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Summary:

Billy never asks for anything. Doesn't hint for anything. Always gives to Steve, and. Steve's not *complaining*. Steve's *grateful*, but. It's not what he'd expected from Billy Hargrove, for starters. And, secondly, Steve wants - so badly - to touch Billy. To *see* Billy.

It only dawns on Steve, one morning, when Billy says, 'Be right back', and heads to the bathroom to change his shirt.

An idea clicks, and. Steve's not sure if he's on the right track, but. He can't understand why else Billy doesn't want to be touched. Doesn't want - for like, the first time ever - to be seen. Looked at. Why Billy has to leave the room, just to *change his shirt*.

pace is the trick

Author's Note:

A couple of general warnings: body image issues & unresolved trauma concerning the events of season 1-3.

Dating Billy Hargrove isn't easy.

Obviously. In retrospect, it sort of goes without saying, but. *Still*. Steve, somehow, had figured it might be easier than this.

Once upon a time, he'd been good at dating. Dating had been, like, his *thing*.

He was never so good at reading textbooks at school, but Steve was good at reading *people*. Reading what they want, what they need, and, more often than not, knowing just how to give it to them.

Steve had hoped that Nancy had been some sort of anomaly, and. Maybe, after her, once Steve found someone that he was serious about, things would just. Slide back into place again. That he'd be *good* at this shit. Like he had been. Before Nancy Wheeler.

But, maybe it isn't just Steve's lack of tact these days. Maybe it's something *more*, because he only starts to date Billy after the events at Starcourt.

Both of them are a mess, which. Probably, that's why they even start this. Because, before everything - the Mind Flayer, the not-so-friendly Russians - Steve could never have foreseen this happening. Why would it? Billy Hargrove hated his guts. Billy Hargrove only wanted to *fight*.

He's wrong, apparently.

Either, he's been wrong the whole time, or, Billy's just changed *a lot* after everything, and has suddenly decided that Steve isn't so bad, after all.

Perhaps they've gravitated towards one another because, finally, they have something in common.

A fuckload of unresolved trauma.

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It starts a little over two whole months after Starcourt burns to the ground.

Billy disappears for a while.

They're *seeing* to Billy, at the lab. Giving him the best care, of course, in return for his discretion.

Like, *sorry you were possessed by this monster, kid, but this is a comfortable bed and, sure, you can have as many visitors as you'd like, anything you'd like - just say the word.* It's the same contract-signing bullshit that Steve - and the others - have already been through.

Steve doesn't visit Billy.

He does, however, drive Max to the lab often enough. El joins her too, sometimes.

So, Billy's gone. Healing up and, presumably, trying to deal with the absolute mindfuck that is Hawkins and all of its wonderful, monster-shaped secrets.

He's gone, until a little over two months, when the bell above Family Video's entrance rings out, and Steve, on autopilot, glances up.

Their eyes meet, and Steve's fairly certain that they both experience the same fight-or-flight response. Billy seems to almost back out of the door again. *Almost.* While Steve, on the other hand, thoroughly contemplates the idea of taking his break a whole hour early, just so he can leave Robin to deal with Hargrove.

They both choose to fight.

Steve stays where he is, behind the counter, shuffling through video returns. Billy wanders into the store, gets lost down some aisle that's

just out of Steve's line of vision.

Nothing happens for nearly ten minutes, and. Suddenly, Steve's feeling like an asshole, because, why should Billy feel the need to back out of the store at the sight of him? That's not *Billy*, for starters. And, secondly, it's just not *fair*.

It's an abrupt and hasty decision when Steve steps out from behind the counter.

He finds Billy lingering in front of the horror section, which. Okay. That's not the genre Steve would be going for. Not after dealing with monsters first-hand, but.

That's not the point.

Billy looks up at him, and says nothing. Watches Steve almost expectantly, but also a little warily.

Steve doesn't know why he's standing here in front of Billy, until he says, 'What you did. That was impressive. Stupid, but. Impressive, man.'

It's a poor attempt at a thank-you, really, and it feels like fucking up.

Billy's quiet for a second, and then he's clearing his throat. Replying with, 'It would've been stupid not to do it.'

Before Steve can say anything else, Billy's stalking past him and the bell above the door rings out again.

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It's not quite a week later, when Steve's parking up outside of Billy's house.

He knows the road well enough by now. He's picked Max up and dropped her off plenty.

This time, he's here for Billy.

Max answers the door. Looks surprised.

'What?' She asks, and Steve scoffs.

'Hello to you, too.'

'Is something wrong?'

'What? No.' Steve runs a hand through his hair, mildly distressed. 'Your brother around?'

Max is clearly taken aback. She *physically* steps back, as though Steve's words have knocked her with some degree of force. 'Billy?'

'You have another brother?'

Max rolls her eyes to the sky and has Steve nearly grinning, even though his palms are absurdly warm and clammy, considering there's a brisk chill outside. Summer is over.

'Why are you looking for Billy?'

'None of your business,' Steve shoots back, coolly enough. 'Is he in, or what?'

Another eyeroll, and then Max is retreating into the house, leaving Steve standing in front of the open door.

Realistically, it's probably a matter of seconds, but it feels like he's left waiting for a long time. Long enough to consider falling back and heading to his car, or. Perhaps that's just the odd flutter of nerves in his stomach, telling him to go. Go, while he can. Go, before Billy appears.

It's too late. Billy's suddenly taking up the vacant space in front of Steve, filling the doorway. 'Harrington?'

Billy's more surprised than Max is. Which makes sense, really, considering Steve's never called on Billy before.

'Hey.' It's a little meek when it comes out, and Steve tries to recover it. Repeats himself, and aims for confidence. 'Hey.'

'Hi?' It comes out as a question; Billy's eyebrows nearly touching his

hairline.

They look at each other for a long second, and then Steve's pushing forward. 'Listen, man. I just came by to talk.'

'Talk about what?'

'Maybe I could come in?' Because Steve's discovered that there's actually a lot to say, and it's quite cold here, on the doorstep.

'No.' Billy's response is immediate. Steve's stomach doesn't *drop*, but. There's still some vague sense of - disappointment? Or, something.

'Oh.' Steve shrugs. 'Okay, well -'

'Your car.' Billy interjects.

Steve whirls around on the spot, asks, 'What about it?', and feels stupid when Billy sort of just smirks at him.

'I mean. Let's go to your car?'

'Oh. *Oh*. Okay. Yeah.' Steve nods, as though his answer isn't clear enough already. 'That's fine.'

In the car, Steve starts the engine. The car kicks to life, a little noisy, and he turns up the heat.

'So,' Billy's the first to speak. 'What's up?'

'I was meaning to visit.' Steve blurts the words out, all rushed. Like if he doesn't say them now, he never will, or. Sort of like they've been punched right out of him.

Billy stares at him, not understanding.

'At the lab.' Steve elaborates. 'I was gonna drop by to see you.'

'Oh.' Billy still looks confused. In fact, he looks more confused now than he did a second ago.

'I mean.' Christ, this is a disaster. 'I'm sorry that I didn't visit.'

Billy laughs, or scoffs. Either way, it's some breathy sound. 'Don't be?' He shrugs. 'Wasn't expecting you or anything.'

'Yeah, well.' Steve returns Billy's shrug. Lets his shoulders droop. 'I wanted to thank you, actually. I've been meaning to, but. Never really found the right time.'

'Thank me? For what?'

'For what you did?'

'Told you already,' Billy shifts in the seat, doesn't quite meet Steve's eyes. 'It's no big deal. Would've been stupid not to.'

'You didn't have to.' Steve states, because it's the truth. Billy, essentially, sacrificed himself. Threw himself in front of El. Saved them all. 'But, you did.'

Silence follows, and Steve's wondering how to wrap the conversation up. There's a lot more to say, but. The words aren't coming.

'It's not a big deal, Harrington,' Billy finally speaks up. 'Is that all?' His hand is already on the door handle, and Steve panics.

'You busy?'

'What? Right now?'

Steve nods. 'Yeah.'

Billy casts a glance towards the house, as though he'll find his answer there. Eventually, he says, 'Nah. Guess not.'

'There's some beer. At my place.' Steve's fingers are restlessly circling the steering wheel. 'Interested?'

Billy just stares at Steve like he's missing something, or waiting for the trick.

'Least I could do, right?' Steve isn't amused, but he tries to make light, anyway. Smiles, just a little. 'Guy saves your life. Get him a beer.'

It's definitely a scoff that Billy lets out, but. He's smiling, too. 'Fine,' he says. 'Give me a minute.'

He climbs out of the car and Steve watches as he crosses back to the house.

Billy doesn't *saunter*. It's a slow walk, actually, and for the first time in a while, Steve's wondering how Billy's healing is going.

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That's how it starts. This *thing* they have. This thing that Steve calls *dating*, even though Billy probably hates the word, and even though they haven't actually verbally labelled it yet.

It is dating, though, because, it's not like it's even just *physical*.

Steve picks Billy up, and they do things. They hang at Steve's place; they go to the movies; they waste time, driving around and listening to music.

They kiss. Like, long make-out sessions that set Steve on fire. Heat him up, and leave him wanting more.

Sometimes, Billy shoves his hand beneath the waistband of Steve's jeans, keeps their mouths connected in a wet kiss while he wraps his fist around him and jerks.

It's *dating*, because they haven't even fucked yet, and they're actually *doing* things together.

Except. They're not *talking*.

Not about the stuff that counts.

Every time Steve tries to mention it, Billy shuts down, which. Is *fine*, of course. He can't force Billy to talk about all the shit that happened, but. It's not just that he wants to know what Billy's feeling - wants to learn more about Billy; Steve sort of feels like *he* needs to talk. Because the nightmares are bad and the panic attacks are bad. And, he isn't even sure that Billy *knows* what had gone on beneath Starcourt. It's not a patch, really, on what Billy had dealt with, but.

It counts.

And they're not talking about it.

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'Will you stay tonight?'

They're lounging on the couch, tangled up together and their limbs aren't their own and they're more or less just *one* person. The TV's on in the background, but Steve isn't paying it much attention. Instead, Steve's thinking about how, now that summer's passed, night is drawing in earlier. The sky's already navy outside.

'Sure,' Billy says.

'Good.' Steve buries a hand in curls that are already messy, and says, 'Kiss me.'

Billy doesn't hesitate, and that never fails to warm Steve right up. Feels like there's a furnace in his chest every time Billy gives it up so easily.

He's tasting Billy's tongue and the dark outside seems less daunting, less important. His fingers are losing themselves in Billy's hair, and his other hand, almost automatically, shifts to the hem of Billy's shirt, starts to tug.

Billy *flinches*. Jumps. The kiss is broken. 'What're you doing?'

'Sorry.' Steve's apology is just as automatic. 'Sorry. I just.' He draws back, tries to read Billy's expression. 'Your shirt. Can I take it off, baby?'

Billy's face softens some, even if his shoulders look rigid, hard. 'Why?'

Steve doesn't really know how to answer that one. It's just. They're making out and, as usual, he's filling out in his jeans and Billy looks so *good* tonight. Smells so good. Steve's trying to ignore the fact that it's dark beyond his house, and. Billy's the best distraction. He wants to feel warm, soft skin beneath the palms of his hands; a solid body,

to remind him that Billy's real and Steve's not alone.

He wants, because it's an effective distraction. He wants, on a more basic level, because he wants *Billy*, and they're dating, and they're making out, but Steve wants *more*.

'To make things easier?' Steve asks, tentative. He tries to relax, smooths out his own expression and offers Billy some sort of playful smile. Something charming, maybe. 'Wanna get my hands on you.'

'I'm tired.' Billy shuts the conversation down almost immediately.

Steve's taken aback, a little. His eyebrows are raised, like that's the *last* thing he'd expected to hear from Billy, especially since one glance down tells Steve that Billy's excited, too. 'Okay,' he says, though, because he can't argue with that. 'Alright. That's fine.'

'Yeah,' Billy shrugs away from Steve's hands. 'You want me to stay, right?'

'Right.'

'Couch, or?'

'No, Billy,' Steve's eyebrows rise higher, somehow. 'My bed. Like usual.'

'Sure. I'm just not in the mood for anything, so.' Billy trails off, and it sounds almost. *Awkward*.

Steve shakes his head. 'Yeah, no. I get that. Doesn't mean you can't sleep in my bed.' The mood has shifted drastically. 'Unless. You don't want to?'

It's Billy's turn to shake his head. 'I do want to. I'm just letting you know that I'm tired, man.'

Man.

The change in atmosphere is almost unbelievable, and Steve's soft now, in his pants, where he'd been stiffening.

Kinda feels like he's crossed some sort of line.

'I know.' He says, trying hard not to sound defensive. 'That's cool. I'm tired, too.'

-

Steve isn't keeping tabs, but he knows that this is some sort of record for him - dating, for nearly two months, without having sex.

He cares - at first.

It's not just that he's horny as hell; Billy driving him nuts, even when it's unintentional. It's also that, really, Steve's wondering if there's something he isn't doing right. Or something he's doing *wrong*.

Wondering if, maybe, they've rushed into things.

They're still getting to know each other, and they're already dating. Went from like, some sort of enemies, to some sort of buddies, to making out on Steve's couch, all in the space of a handful of weeks. He can't help but wonder if Billy's regretting it. If, somehow, Billy had just gotten carried away. Felt like kissing, but hadn't signed up for the rest. In too deep, or whatever.

But, Billy would say something. Steve's sure of that. There's no way Billy would play along with it, just for the sake of it. Just to avoid hurting Steve's feelings or some shit.

Billy wouldn't spend most of his time at Steve's place, if he didn't *want* to.

The thing is. They're still not *talking*. If they had better communication skills, they'd have figured things out by now.

If *Steve* had the sense - and the guts - to push, to ask, then things might be easier.

He doesn't try to put his hands on Billy again. Even when they're sharing his bed, and Steve's shirt is off, and Billy's kissing his stomach. Steve doesn't try.

Even when Steve's on the couch, jeans slipped down past his hips, Billy on the floor between his thighs.

Billy never asks for anything. Doesn't hint for anything. Always gives to Steve, and. Steve's not *complaining*. Steve's *grateful*, but. It's not what he'd expected from Billy Hargrove, for starters. And, secondly, Steve wants - so badly - to touch Billy. To *see* Billy.

It only dawns on Steve, one morning, when Billy says, 'Be right back', and heads to the bathroom to change his shirt.

An idea clicks, and. Steve's not sure if he's on the right track, but. He can't understand why else Billy doesn't want to be touched. Doesn't want - for like, the first time ever - to be seen. Looked at. Why Billy has to leave the room, just to *change his shirt*.

When it clicks, Steve thinks, *you're an idiot, Harrington*.

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The first time they fuck, it feels more like sex. Feels more like. Well.

Just *more* than fucking.

The first time they have sex, Billy's hair is wet. Steve's is wet, too. Flops over his forehead, sends rain falling down. Down onto Billy.

Steve invites him over. It's spontaneous, for the most part. It's just two days after things *click*.

They never talk. About things that matter. Steve wants to talk.

He wants to talk, but, first, they're kissing. On the couch. Curled up in one another.

Billy makes the first move, reaches out a hand and cups Steve over denim.

It's embarrassing, probably, that he *groans*, but the friction is enough to coax a sound out of him, either way. He covers Billy's hand with his own, keeps him still. 'Pool.'

'Huh?'

'Pool. Let's swim.'

'You're kidding.' Billy shifts his hand from beneath Steve's, pulls it back.

'Nope.'

'It's November.'

'Yeah,' Steve smiles, 'but the pool's *heated*.' He winks, like it's some pick-up line.

Billy scoffs. 'Haven't brought any shorts.'

'You can borrow some of mine.' Steve shrugs. 'Or, don't wear any at all.'

Billy rolls his eyes. 'Why the pool?'

'Thought you liked to swim?'

'Sure, but. That's why you invited me over? To swim?'

Steve shrugs again. 'Why not?' He moves in close, rests his head against Billy's shoulder. 'Besides, swimming's great exercise. You keep saying how it's bullshit, that you can't work out. Swimming's good, right? Not too,' Steve pauses, trying to find the word; waves a hand around, trying to catch it. 'Strenuous?'

Billy raises his eyebrows. 'Okay. You're right. But. Don't you wanna kiss me, pretty boy?'

'Very much,' Steve's quick to respond. 'There's a lot I wanna do to you.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah.' He tips his head, tucks a kiss against Billy's neck. 'Pool?'

-

The sky is black.

But the pool is lit up. All blue and shimmering, and eerie enough to take Steve's breath away.

Billy's right; it's cold. Freezing, in fact, but. Steve's hardly feeling it. He's used to the temperature, and even if he wasn't, it's the last thing on his mind.

Billy's inside, somewhere. Reluctantly changing into a pair of Steve's shorts. Steve's already by the pool, but keeping a safe distance. Shirt off, shorts on. Shivering.

'Hey.'

Steve turns, fast. Billy's behind him, a towel draped over his shoulders, hands pinning it together across his chest. Just as Steve had expected.

'Hey,' he shoots back. Hopes he doesn't sound too distant. 'You okay?'

Billy nods.

'Cold?' Steve asks.

'Cold's an understatement, asshole.' But Billy's smiling, and there's no bite behind his words.

'The water should be nice, at least.' Steve turns away from Billy, looks back at the pool. 'Hey, Billy?'

'What?' Billy's closer. Sounds louder, like he's next to Steve now, not behind.

'Show me yours, and I'll show you mine.'

Billy laughs. 'Now, now, Harrington -'

'No,' Steve cuts in. 'Your scars.'

'What?' Billy's voice doesn't sound dangerous, exactly, but. There's something stirring beneath the surface.

'You don't want me to see, do you?' Steve looks away from the pool. Even when he does, he's still seeing it. Water, shimmery and reflective, in Billy's eyes. 'Your body.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Russians.' Steve says, and silence follows. Billy might think he's making no sense, and. He isn't. Not really. But it's hard to talk about these things. Steve isn't following a script. 'When the Mind Flayer had you, I was trapped under the mall.' He scoffs, quiet; nearly inaudible. 'Some Russian base beneath Starcourt.'

'Russian base?' Billy's shivering. Steve can hear it in his voice.

'Yeah.' He nods. 'Couldn't make this shit up.'

Billy says nothing, so Steve continues. 'I'm sorry we couldn't help you, Billy.' It might not be a good idea, but Steve reaches out anyway. Slips his hand into Billy's. 'If I could go back -' He trails off, because there's nothing more to say. He can't go back. Neither of them can.

Still, Billy doesn't say a word. But he doesn't pull away from Steve's touch, either. Steve thinks he can work with that.

'Anyway,' Steve squeezes Billy's hand, 'I know you don't want me to see you. That's what it is, right? You won't change in front of me. You don't want me to touch you.'

'Steve.' Billy states his name, and Steve waits, but. Nothing comes.

'It's okay. You don't have to show me.' Steve's thumb is restless, sweeping over Billy's knuckles. 'But I don't want you to hide from me.'

It's the best Steve can do.

'That's why you suggested the pool?' Billy asks.

Steve nods. 'Yeah. Like I said, show me yours, and I'll show you mine?'

It's quiet, until Steve feels Billy shift next to him, and hears the

muffled thud of his towel hitting the ground.

Gently, Billy lets go of his hand.

He steps forward. Walks, until he's in front of Steve.

It's dark, but the pool is lit up, and the water casts shadows across Billy.

Steve notices the scar that runs down his side, first. Notices how it spreads, reaches Billy's lower back.

And, then, Billy turns around. Turns, so that he's facing Steve. He's looking at his feet, and that's the first thing that Steve picks up on.

'Billy,' Steve's voice is soft. 'Look at me.'

Billy does, and when their eyes meet, he smiles, or smirks. 'You came for me a little late, Harrington.' His expression falters, but it's brief, and then there's a grin plastered on his face. 'If only you'd wanted me a year ago.'

Steve shakes his head. 'No.' He lets his eyes explore Billy's skin. Scarred chest and stomach. Webs of silver, intricate and smooth-looking. 'You're beautiful.'

'I'm not.' Billy's face does drop now. 'I don't want you to say that.'

'Why not?'

'Because you're lying.' Billy looks agitated, but his tone is meek. 'Obviously.'

'I'm not lying to you.' Steve steps forward, unsure if he has Billy's permission. He stalls, then asks, 'Can I?'

Billy shrugs, but it doesn't seem like a 'no'. Seems more like a, *go for it, if you're sure you want to*. Steve does want to.

He doesn't run his fingers across textured skin. He brings his arms around Billy's waist, instead.

Essentially, Steve *hugs* Billy. Embraces him, in fact, until their in each other's space, chest-to-chest. He tilts his face in, so he can speak into Billy's ear. 'Beautiful, baby.'

Billy shivers. It might not be the cold, but, Steve draws back anyway, and tells him, 'You should get in the pool. Get warm.'

He does.

Billy doesn't throw himself into the pool; he takes the steps. Slowly descends into the water, and Steve can't take his eyes off him. Is mesmerised, for lack of a better word, by the shapes and the colours that swim across his skin.

When he disappears, Steve's breath catches in his throat. Feels like being grasped, viciously, around the neck.

He can only exhale when Billy reappears, hair wet, and shoulder-deep in the water.

'You were right. Water's good.'

Steve smiles.

'Coming in?' Billy asks, wading closer to the edge of the pool.

Steve doesn't answer. Says, 'Thanks for showing me, Billy.'

'Huh?'

'Your body.'

'Sure,' Billy cocks his head. 'What about you? Can't see a single scar on you, pretty boy.'

'The pool.' Steve feels frozen to the spot. 'It's one of my scars.'

'What do you mean?'

'A lot of care goes into that pool. Keeping it clean. Keeping it cool in summer, and warm in winter.' It's only fair, Steve thinks. Billy's already shown his scars. 'There's no point, really. I don't go in there

anymore.'

Billy's thoroughly confused - it's written all over his face. 'Oh?'

'Yeah. Don't really come out *here*, anymore. Try to avoid it, actually.'

Billy's at the edge of the pool, elbows propped out of the water. Steve edges closer, and it feels like taking a risk. Even though Billy's right there; even though they're safe. Maybe.

His body is trying to fight but, somehow, Steve manages to sink down, until he's sitting. He holds his breath, and then drops his feet into the water, and Billy's right *there*. His elbow grazing against Steve's knee. Billy's there, and Steve's not alone.

'Nancy's friend, Barbara.' The name is bittersweet on his tongue. 'Something got her. Here. Right here.' His feet are in the water, but nothing is dragging him under. 'We left her. Just. Left her here. Went upstairs. Never saw her again.'

Billy says nothing, but he's listening. Steve knows, because there's a firm hand, now, resting flat on his thigh.

'That's why I can't come in here. That's why I never -' He trails off, lost in thought for a moment. When he speaks again, it's after a scoff. 'This,' he says, and gestures towards where his feet are hidden beneath the water. 'This is a big deal. Just this.'

The first thing Billy says is, 'You blame yourself.'

'Hard not to.' Steve admits. 'We didn't know, though. I didn't. Nancy didn't. We didn't know about all of the shit going on in this town.'

'It's not your fault.' Billy floats, moves, until he's between Steve's legs. 'How were you supposed to know?'

'I'm not ready,' Steve says then.

'Not ready? For what?'

'Not ready to come into the water.'

Billy's hands are on Steve's hips. Firm, solid. Wet.

'I thought,' Steve begins, a crooked smile curling his mouth. 'I thought that we could do it together, y'know? Like, overcome something together, or whatever.'

Billy nods. 'It was a good idea.'

'I'm not sure.' He shrugs. 'You did it, though. You're brave, Billy.'

'Nah,' Billy leans forward, rests his head in Steve's lap. Wet hair soaking through Steve's shorts. 'It's not about being brave. I guess I already knew you'd be okay with it.'

'Okay with what?'

'My body. The scars.'

Steve strokes damp curls. 'It doesn't even matter what I think. But, Christ, Billy. You're perfect.'

Steve's expecting to hear protests, but Billy says nothing. It feels like progress.

'It's okay,' Billy says next. 'You don't have to come in.'

'I'm weak.' Steve states, and it sounds too much like a revelation. Like something he's been sitting on for a while.

'You're not weak.' Billy lifts his head to take a good look at Steve. His voice is firm when he says, 'You're the brave one here, Steve.'

Steve calls bullshit, but he's also not in the mood to argue. He thinks that, even if he were to argue, there'd be no point. Billy's not going to let him have the last word.

Billy drifts away, and Steve's hand falls from his hair. Slaps, damp, against his own thigh. He doesn't ask where he's going - doesn't need to.

Steve watches as Billy swims towards the pool steps. He doesn't heave himself out over the pool wall, and. It dawns on Steve - again - that

Billy's still healing.

The wet *slap-slap-slap* of feet tell Steve that Billy's out of the pool and is approaching him, and suddenly, strong arms are helping him to his feet.

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Billy stinks of chlorine.

Steve leads him upstairs, up to his bedroom, and into the en-suite.

'You don't mind?' He asks, glancing at the shower while his fingers are already slipping beneath the waistband of Billy's shorts.

'Not one bit.'

The shower's already on, water slowly warming and misting up the bathroom.

Steve helps Billy out of his shorts before tugging down his own.

He doesn't mind this - being naked, in front of Billy. Doesn't feel the insecurity that Billy so-obviously does.

Billy repeats his comment from earlier. Says, 'If you'd have come to me a year ago...', as though he doesn't look fucking *good*, standing in Steve's bathroom, naked and hair dripping.

'Stop it.' Steve tells him. Steps in close and kisses his throat. Murmurs there, 'Think I found you at just the right time.'

-

Billy's flushed, fresh from showering. There's a dusting of pink across his cheekbones, and his hair is even wetter than before.

Steve's wet, too. A towel wrapped around his hips to match the one that's tied around Billy's.

It's cooler, here in his bedroom. Cooler than in the fogged-up bathroom.

Steve crosses the room, starts to rummage through the drawers to find some clothes. Some for himself, and some for Billy to borrow, but.

Billy says, 'Don't.'

And Steve looks up, startled. 'Huh?'

'Come here,' Billy's standing by Steve's bed, arms folded over his chest in a gesture that's *too* casual to be *truly* casual. Billy's trying hard to look unfazed, but. Steve knows this is hard for him - standing in front of Steve, scars bared.

Steve does as he's told. Can't help himself when he asks, 'Everything okay?', and can't help it, just the same, when he wraps his arms around Billy's waist.

Their bodies are slick with water. Slippery, where they meet.

'Yeah, sweetheart.' Billy smiles. 'Everything's good.'

Steve believes him, for the most part, because Billy's stepping forward, and. His hands are on Steve's hips, tugging on the loose knot that keeps the towel tied together. There's no protest from Steve; he just stands still, lets it happen. Wants it to happen.

Billy's towel hits Steve's bedroom floor, next. He asks, 'Bed?'

-

Billy's flushed.

On his back. Damp hair soaking Steve's pillow, and damp thighs tightly clamped around Steve's waist.

He's beautiful, and Steve tells him so.

Repeatedly, in fact. Enough for Billy to laugh, to speak a little breathlessly. 'Shut up and fuck me, Harrington.'

Steve laughs, and it feels like some weight has been lifted from his shoulders.

He moves with ease. Builds a rhythm and rocks his hips into Billy, nice and steady.

His hair is wet, still. Drips over his forehead and falls, like gentle rain, onto Billy. Onto his closed eyelids, his cheek. He doesn't seem to mind. Might not even notice, because his lips are parted and he makes a pretty noise every time Steve pushes inside. Drool collects at the corner of his mouth and Steve dips his head to kiss it.

Dating hasn't been easy, but. *This*. This feels easy. And, it's not the *sex*, exactly, but the *closeness*.

They're practically one; Steve as deep as he can get. As deep as Billy's body will allow. He mutters, 'Relax for me, baby. Try to relax.'

Billy's tight, and he's hot. So *hot*. But he relaxes, gradually. Manages to unclench and just. Melt, around Steve instead.

'Good,' Steve praises. 'That's it, Billy.'

It's easy; the way that Steve picks up the pace of his hips and rocks into Billy with intent. Rocks, until he feels hands in his wet hair. Fingers curling and uncurling, all restless and needy, and Billy's saying his name.

His *name*. Like, not *Harrington*, but -

'Steve,' Billy's breathless. Breathless and pretty and sounds so *soft*. If Steve didn't already know any better, listening to Billy now, he'd never believe that he could be so rough. Volatile, sometimes. Not while he's soft and pliant and so *easy* underneath him. 'Fuck, Steve. More. I can take it.'

Steve believes him. Slows down his pace but thrusts in *deep*. Slow, and deep, and hard, until a string of sounds is being drawn out of Billy, unstoppable and hot, and varying between quiet and loud, and smooth and scratchy.

Steve's the first to come. He tries to hold out, but. It sort of just *happens*, with very little warning. He's spilling into the condom, still buried inside Billy, hips coming to a stop, just so he can shudder through the white-hot wave, the edge of his teeth nicking the sweat-

damp flesh at the crook of Billy's neck. 'Shit, fuck.' And, Billy just takes it. Keeps moving, where Steve has stilled. Lifts and rocks into where Steve's filling him. Grinds against the friction while Steve just trembles and groans, unable to do much of anything else.

Until Billy's moan knocks some sense back into him, and Steve's moving fast. Dips a hand beneath their bodies to wrap a fist around Billy's leaking cock.

He's oversensitive and aching, but Steve resumes the motion of his hips, anyway. Keeps fucking Billy, even though the condom is full and sticky and uncomfortable against his raw skin. He fucks Billy and jerks his wrist at the same time. 'C'mon, baby,' he mumbles, words damp and pressed against Billy's neck. 'Feel so good for me. So hot, and tight, and. Fuck. I know you wanna come for me, Billy.'

The fingers in Steve's hair tighten; send a sharp jolt of lightning through him, from head to toe. 'That's it,' he says, knowing, almost intuitively, that Billy's close, or. Maybe it's the fact that Billy's panting beneath Steve, body tightening and growing rigid all over. 'You want to, don't you, baby? Want to come for me.'

'Shit,' Billy breathes, still moving to meet Steve's thrusts, despite the fact that the motion is sloppy now, less focused. 'Yeah, Steve, yeah. Wanna come.'

'Good.' Steve kisses Billy's neck. Promises, 'Gonna make you, baby. Gonna get you there.'

He delivers on his promise. Gives Billy's cock a sudden squeeze and pumps faster, harder. Strokes from base to tip and smears pre around the head with the pad of his thumb. Pushes into him, at the same time, balls-deep and *stays* there. Keeps still, while he focuses on jerking Billy off.

'Like that,' Billy pants. Voice all broken up when he says, 'Just like that, Steve, shit, yeah, like -'

Then Billy's coming, hot and hard and spurting all over Steve's hand; spurting, where his cock is trapped between their bodies. Come hits Steve's stomach, he thinks, and. They've only just showered, but it

doesn't matter. What matters is seeing Billy through his orgasm, so Steve draws his hips back, then closes in again, hand never stopping its squeezing, its stroking. Billy never stops, either; never stops making *sounds*, and. That seems about right. Seems like a Billy Hargrove sort of thing, even if Steve would never have imagined him to sound so *sweet*.

Billy finishes with a, 'Fuck', and bats Steve's hand away. Literally just, tries to push Steve away, even though he's still *inside* him.

'Careful,' Steve says, soothing Billy with a flat palm on his stomach. 'One second.' Slowly, he pulls out. He's sensitive, and the rubber's grating against him. Once there's enough room to dip a hand between them again, Steve tactfully rolls the condom off and ties it. Legs weak, he climbs off the bed, just so he can dispose of the thing. Tosses it into the bin that sits beneath his desk.

Billy's still on his back, legs parted and trembling. Skin all shiny and slick with sweat.

If Steve's own legs weren't trembling, he'd stand a little longer, maybe. Just stare at Billy for a while, because. He's pretty, and breathless, and his eyelids are heavy, even though his eyes are *bright*.

He catches Steve watching, but doesn't give him shit for it. Just says, 'Come lie down.'

-

Billy falls asleep first.

It isn't easy.

This *thing* they have, but.

It could get easier.

Now that Billy's expressed some level of trust in Steve.

Enough, perhaps, to not hide away from him.

Steve still doesn't switch his bedside lamp off, but, still. He closes his

eyes without checking every corner of the room first. Tucks his face into Billy's neck and wraps his arms around him. Hooks an ankle around Billy's leg. Billy stirs, but doesn't wake, and Steve just. Smiles, a little, into Billy's skin. Smells like the pool, initially, and Steve nearly draws back, until the smell of *Billy* comes through. The faint scent of sweat and whatever strong cologne he'd been wearing long before the swimming pool or the shower.

Steve stays and, sort of like dipping his feet into the pool water, it feels like progress. Feels like progress, to tuck a kiss against Billy's pulse and to not feel the overwhelming need to open his eyes against the dark, but. Rather to slip into the darkness behind his eyelids, instead. To slip into sleep. Drifting off to the sound of Billy's steady, in-out breathing, that's solid and real and right there with him.